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National Park Service Archeology Programs in Alaska

The Big Picture

When ones thinks about the national park areas in Alaska, great size and wilderness often come to mind—and for good reason. Two thirds (over 54 million acres) of the acreage in the national park system is in Alaska and 62% of that acreage (almost 34 million acres) is wilderness. Road access to the parks is either non-existent or very limited. Except for Sitka and Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Parks it is very easy to think of the Alaskan parks as wild nature preserves. Many, including some National Park Service employees, do think of them in that way. Nothing could be farther from the truth, however. Cultural resources are an integral part of all national park units in Alaska, and are specifically referenced in the enabling legislation for most of them.

The prospect of identifying and understanding the archeology of over 54 million acres of land ranging from the northwest coast to interior Alaska to the Arctic and from sea level to over 20,000 feet is daunting, to say the least. In terms of acreage, that is the equivalent to surveying all of the state of Utah, the 13th largest state in the nation. Combine this fact with the very short field season in most of the parks and you have identified many lifetimes of work for more archeologists than are currently

employed by the National Park Service. These facts have influenced our approach to conducting archeological investigations in the parks in Alaska.

In the early years of Alaska NPS archeology, there was no consistent source of dollars for archeological inventory, nor a systematic approach to the overall conduct of archeological research. At that time there were no archeological overviews and assessments to guide research directions, priorities, or methods. The usual approach to large-scale inventory was to select a target park for survey and hire a team of seasonal archeologists for the summer. The crew chief was usually hired in May to write the research design prior to launching field operations in June. Crews would return from the field in mid-August and the crew chief would attempt to write up a report on the findings by the end of September when he or she would be let go until the following spring, if the project involved more than one season. With this approach there was little consistency in the reporting of results or the quality of reporting. It was frequently difficult to relate one piece of survey work to the next and often a challenge to relate one year of work to subsequent years, even in the framework of a single project. This tendency toward fragmentation and inconsistency in approach was even more evident in Section 106 compliance projects which tended to be smaller in scale and were usually performed within tight monetary and time constraints.

In general, when archeological sites were threatened either by natural forces or human action it frequently proved difficult to assess significance or determine which sites merited priority status with regard to special protective measures or data recovery. Lacking overarching contextual frameworks from which to judge what level of mitigation or protection was appropriate, we sometimes spent more dollars than necessary on sites that did not deserve the attention and other times much less on sites that did deserve extra effort.

As we approached the 1990s in Alaska, we could claim to have active inventory, testing, and data recovery projects, but no archeology program as a whole. Progress toward a coherent program was fitful and our ability to advance the cause of

The large size and remoteness of most of the parks in Alaska can cause serious logistical problems for archeological crews. The plane delivering archeologists to Bering Land Bridge National Preserve had a disagreement with the beach landing site.





Archeological survey at McArthur Pass, Kenai Fjords National Park, after the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Note the darker, oiled rocks along the shoreline.

archeological preservation with park management had begun to stall. What is more, the involvement of outside cooperators was nearly nonexistent as were our consultative relationships and partnerships with the Alaska Native community. Without change we would soon be awash in a sea of ill-described lithic scatters and other sites of unknown significance and meaning.

One of the first corrective steps we took was to exercise the option of year-round hire to facilitate the completion of archeological projects. Secondly, we placed a major emphasis on the production of archeological overviews and assessments for all the parks. The first Alaskan overview and assessment, for Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, was completed and published in 1988, and we currently have overviews completed or progress for 12 of the 15 major park units.

The thematic nature of the Cultural Resource Mining and Minerals Inventory, a lawsuit-driven Section 106 compliance survey which focused on all parks with active mining claims, also helped to turn the tide. This well-funded, multi-park project began in 1985 and over the next 10 years gathered a vast, unified archive of comparable archeological data on hundreds of historic mining sites scattered throughout the majority of Alaska's parks.

Another opportunity for change was provided by special funding for the Beringian Heritage International Park. Starting in 1991, dollars channeled through the Shared Beringian Heritage Program enabled us to provide a geomorphological and paleoecological context to the archeological sites of the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve. From the start, this program relied heavily upon the cooperation and common vision of a wide variety of disciplinary specialists located in educational institutions around the nation.¹ In addition, the program provided the stimulus and means for the incorporation of traditional Native knowledge

in the archeological story, and it actively promoted the sharing of information with the public.² As it turned out, the approach taken in the initial years of the Shared Beringian Heritage Program proved to be a harbinger of the archeological future.

In late 1992, the National Park Service began the Systemwide Archeological Inventory Program (usually referred to as SAIP), whose goal "is to conduct systematic, scientific research to locate, evaluate, and document archeological resources on National Park System lands."³ In 1989 the Exxon Valdez oil spill impacted portions of Kenai Fjords National Park and Katmai National Park and Preserve. The efforts to assess and mitigate the impacts of this spill clearly demonstrated that the National Park Service knew very little about the cultural resources present along those coast lines. In an effort to address that lack of information, the first SAIP-funded program undertaken in Alaska was a multi-year, multi-park archeological survey designed to identify and record archeological resources in select portions of the coastal areas of five parks (Kenai Fjords, Katmai, Glacier Bay, Lake Clark and Wrangell-St. Elias) and to assess the potential for other portions of the coasts to contain significant archeological resources.

In many ways this project has set the standard for SAIP projects in Alaska. It has been a cooperative effort among the National Park Service, the Smithsonian Institution, USGS, and the University of Alaska. It involved working with park employees and local Native Alaskan groups to increase the local interest in archeology and the resources that were found. It involved developing research designs, preparing professional final reports, and conducting top quality research archeology in a resource management arena.

In fiscal years 1993 through 1997, archeological inventories and evaluations have included 34 surveys, at least one of which was conducted in every park unit in Alaska, and six archeological overviews and assessments. A total of 34,600 acres have been surveyed, 923 new sites have been recorded and 606 sites have been evaluated. While we are proud of these accomplishments, 34,600 acres represents only 6/100 of a percent of the National Park Service land in Alaska. There are many archeological careers yet to come in the National Park Service in Alaska before we can begin to see our archeological inventories as complete!

In addition to the inventories, we have conducted 11 testing and data recovery projects in six parks. They have ranged from the multi-year, multi-park SAIP survey mentioned previously to the first systematic archeological survey in Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve.

They have included the first archeological survey in the Alagnak Wild River area, the first extensive archeological survey focused on identifying prehistoric sites in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, and collaboration with Native Alaskans on surveys and excavations in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, Noatak National Preserve, and Katmai National Park and Preserve.

The biggest change that has taken place in the archeological programs in the last five years is that the staffs in the parks have become much more significant players. In the past, nearly all the archeological studies were carried out or coordinated by staff in the Regional Office in Anchorage. Now, most of the archeological studies are conducted or overseen by archeologists directly in the parks. This has increased the visibility of archeological programs in the parks and has increased the level of commitment to archeology by the park managers. It has also made coordination of the overall program in the region more difficult. Overall, however, we think the change has been positive. If park managers always see archeology as something that is done by someone else in another office and as something that has no direct connection to management of the park and its resources, then it is no wonder that archeological resources are perceived as being of lesser importance than biological resources, park operations, and building maintenance.

Clearly, there is no reason to ever archeologically survey the entire acreage of every park in Alaska. Even if it made sense archeologically, and it does not, the costs would be prohibitive. At \$84 an acre, which has been the average cost of surveys over the last five years, it would cost almost 4.6 billion dollars to survey all of the National Park Service acreage in Alaska. Therefore, we have staff assigned to developing research designs for three parks, Denali National Park and Preserve

(over 6 million acres), Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (almost 8 1/2 million acres), and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve (over 13 million acres). The purpose of the research designs will be to take all relevant factors and existing data and develop a stratified universe for each of the parks. This stratification will identify those areas that have the highest potential to contain archeological sites as well as those areas that have the highest potential for sites that could be adversely impacted by natural and human causes. These research designs will then be used to develop project statements for future work.

In addition, because of the success of the multi-park, multi-year coastal archeological survey project, we are exploring new ways for staffs in the parks and the Alaska Support Office to cooperate on archeological projects in the future. These could be linked along geographical or thematic lines. The bottom line is, regardless of the progress we have made, unless we continue to refine the process of how we go about conducting archeological studies, and keep improving our efforts to work together, both within the National Park Service and with our collaborators, our archeological programs are doomed to fail. We do not intend to let that happen.

Notes

- ¹ Jeanne Schaaf, "Understanding Northern Environments and Human Populations Through Cooperative Research: A Case Study in Beringia" in *Human Ecology and Climate Change: People and Resources in the Far North*, edited by David L. Peterson and Darryll R. Johnson (Taylor and Francis, Washington, DC, 1995), pp. 229-244.
- ² National Park Service, *Ublasaun: Inupiaq Hunters and Herders in the Early Twentieth Century, Northern Seward Peninsula, Alaska*, National Park Service, Anchorage, Alaska, 1996.
- ³ Michelle Aubry, Dana C. Linck, Mark J. Lynott, Robert R. Mierendorf, and Kenneth M. Schoenberg, *Systemwide Archeological Inventory Program*, National Park Service, Washington, DC, 1992.

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Photos courtesy NPS.

Archeological test excavations at the Irwin Sluiceway Site, an Early Man site in the upper Anisak drainage in Noatak National Preserve. This project was a collaborative effort between the national Park Service and the Smithsonian Institution.

